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ABSTRACT

The project sees study of art culture through primary source inquiry as a valuable experience for the art educator. Regardless of the culture, artist, or time period studied, the work of art makes itself known through both intellectual and emotive responses to it. Through description of Mayan culture, society, and artifacts, art as an extension of, and response to, contextual expression, should not be taken out of context. The dilemma for multiculturally sensitive art educators is how to keep artifacts in their cultural settings and yet transport them into the classroom for examination. This document appeals for scrutiny in selection of artifacts for use in the educational process, and presents thoughtful inquiry as a technique for resolving the dilemma of transport from context to classroom. Questions for critical consideration are: "What are the key monuments in the culture?"; "Why did someone want to create this?"; and "For what purpose was it created?" (MM)

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Considering the art history of El Mundo Maya: Some issues regarding the inquiry process

We must view art of all cultures as a form of knowledge. In this sense knowledge should be understood to mean understanding by some rational means -- information, learning, scholarship. It cannot be denied, however, that there is also a undercurrent of emotional understanding that is a part of, though not wholly dependent upon, intellectual response. A work of art makes itself known through both our intellectual and emotive responses to it.

The reliance of Western man on rational interpretation has led assumptions, on the part of many who study art, that a visual work of art can be adequately translated into words. It cannot. Art is, more than anything else, about the communication of experiences. And human experience is subjective. The experience of each artist is unique. Likewise, the experiences of a viewer or critic are also subjective. A work of art and attempts to understand it makes for a continuous layering of meanings that define each other.

It is impossible not to use some standards by which to judge art. And how can we make sense of some art forms from cultures where experiences are so different from our own? First, we must

be clear in what needs to be done. Works of art must be made sense of for what they are. We can approach the problem of defining a revised non-Western art canon by describing, identifying, and analyzing those characteristics that uniquely mark a work of art or group of works. This must be done as objectively as possible -- although our personal perception, value structures, and educational philosophies will color any understandings gleaned from our efforts. At issue here is the problem of trying to identify works of art. With each work certain questions must be asked. What is its particular content, unique structure, and special meaning? What marks it as to time, and culture?

The Classic Maya of 700 AD had created their own world. They had many complex ideas, beliefs, and ideals which are all evidenced in their art. As a group these people were often warlike and regularly practiced human sacrifice. They also developed sophisticated mathematical knowledge including the concept of zero and the employment of a calendar the equal of ours today.

The Maya embraced a complex mythology and recorded the events of their long history with a form of writing that is not yet completely deciphered. Their civilization was built cultural underpinnings which date back to 2000 BC, and perhaps even

earlier. But within the Mayan empire at any given time in its history was, as one might expect, a complex interaction of personalities, new ideas, and emerging power structures. The status quo was apparently difficult to maintain. Archaeologists have found that Mayan architecture often encases many previous structures; the new overcame and made use of the old. It is clear that concepts of what was important changed over time. Apparently ideas about individual freedom were practically unknown whereas obligation and subservience to centralized authority was de rigueur.

Maya cities of fifty thousand and more were maintained through complex bureaucratic systems supported by advanced agricultural techniques and tribute systems which in some ways resemble medieval Europe. There is much more: the concept of the wheel was known to the Maya but they apparently never employed it in either transportation of engineering; the technology of metallurgy never superceded that of lithics (stone) for tool and weapon making; the religion of the Maya, in its various manifestations, focused on the passage of time and on tribute to a complex pantheon of gods which were often placated by live offerings; the Maya civilization was well past its zenith by the time the first Conquistadors arrived in the sixteenth century; these same Spanish adventurers were both the destroyers and final recorders of Maya lifeways.

The many forms of Maya art captured the essence of their beliefs and ceremonies in a wide variety of media: wood sculpture, monumental stone architecture, stucco sculpture, worked stone jewelry, weapons, and tools. The more deeply one looks at the Maya the more awestruck one is by the number and quality of their accomplishments. But what has been available to us about the Maya, and so many other nonWestern groups, through the literature and experience of traditional art education over the decades of the twentieth century? In the final decade of this century we can look back over time and see that much of what the Maya dealt with is still with us today.

The Maya faced environmental stress, overpopulation, repeated armed conflicts, struggles for power from within and without. And the fact is that their art reflects much about how they viewed themselves and others. But access to such insights can only be possible if we increase breadth and depth of what is considered to be within the canon of art historical study, e.g., the work of art historian Linda Schele.

Art Historian Linda Schele's inquiries have revealed that the art the Maya was induced by an inner spirituality, a desire to applaud an event in some way, or as part of a ritual ceremony. But such conclusions can also be attributed to those studying the art of cultures and people worldwide. The need to "mark make" is uniquely human. This phenomenon is confined to our species and

has been part of it for hundred of thousands of years. If we believe this is so then there is no question about "which" cultures to include in a multi-cultural art canon. We do not have a canon because there is not one set of criteria or standards that applies to the varied expressions of man. We cannot have a canon because we have yet to agree on what art is.

Art education can significantly enhance the potential for our contemporaries to see their connectedness with the past. We can do so by helping reveal the content of art as it comments on and reveals the present condition of man. But none of this can be accomplished without the inclusion of works representative of all cultures and time periods and the inclusion of information and paradigms from disciplines that are often not considered mainstream art education -- anthropology and archaeology for example.

How can we be more accepting of spiritual points of views manifested in the art of the Maya? All art is an extension of human language. It is a visual/ verbal language. Art says something. It is unfair and unfit to take it out of context. Even if we cannot go to Guatemala and experience Mayan art holistically, we must accept it on its own terms. That is why it is so hard to deal with multicultural curriculum. We cannot take it out of its cultural setting yet we cannot transport that setting adequately to the classroom. To top it off we often then

impose Western values on the art we do import. It was suggested here that we are already creating a multicultural canon by the visuals and materials being distributed by publishers such as Shorewood and Crizmack. Such materials, multicultural though they may be, may be selected again for their Western trails of beauty, balance, and simply general appeal. We must be concerned with the criteria for making decisions about what is included and what is excluded from any revised canon. Who is to make such decisions and upon what evidence or information will their decisions be based?

The concept of the key monument, that which provides access, to the rich visual heritage of a culture is important issue to deal with. What are such key monuments in each culture? Can they be found and, if so, who will identify them? The selection process of anything that is to be used in the educational process must be closely scrutinized. What will be selected? By whom? For whom? What purposes are served by leaving out other examples and other cultures? We also need to consider information about what precipitated the art we study. What did someone <u>want</u> to create this? And for what purpose was it created?